

# WOMEN on WHEELS



Arvind Gupta  
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Ishita Dharap



Dedicated to P. Sainath -  
Extraordinary People's Journalist

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# Sheela Rani Chunkath

Sheela Rani Chunkath is a young, pro-poor, pro-women, dynamic lady IAS - District Collector of Pudukkottai. As the Chairperson of the District Literacy Society, she adds CYCLING to the literacy movement.

# Vijaya

Vijaya is a fiery young woman. Poverty prevents her from completing her education. Determined and strong she stands up for what she thinks is right.



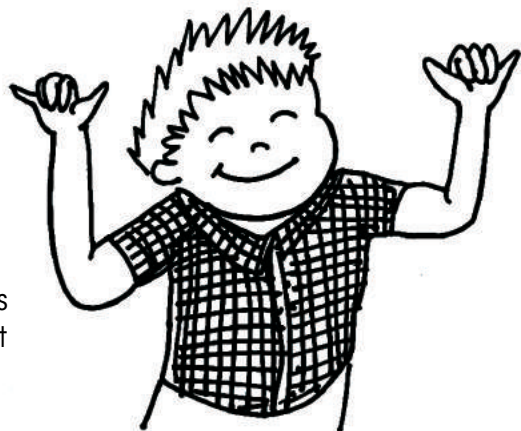
# Amina

Amina is Vijaya's dear childhood friend. She is gutsy and resourceful. Married into a traditional family, she struggles to break her fetters to fly free.



# Ravi

Ravi is Vijaya's younger brother. He is everyone's favourite mischief maker. He is curious and climbs every tree and wall to apprise himself of the latest happenings in Pudukkottai. He is a helping and lovable lad.



Our story begins in 1991. It was a warm summer morning in the District of Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu, India...



Ravi was Vijaya's younger brother. He was nine, and was always monkeying around. But Vijaya sensed something different today. Could it be an accident? Something seemed amiss.

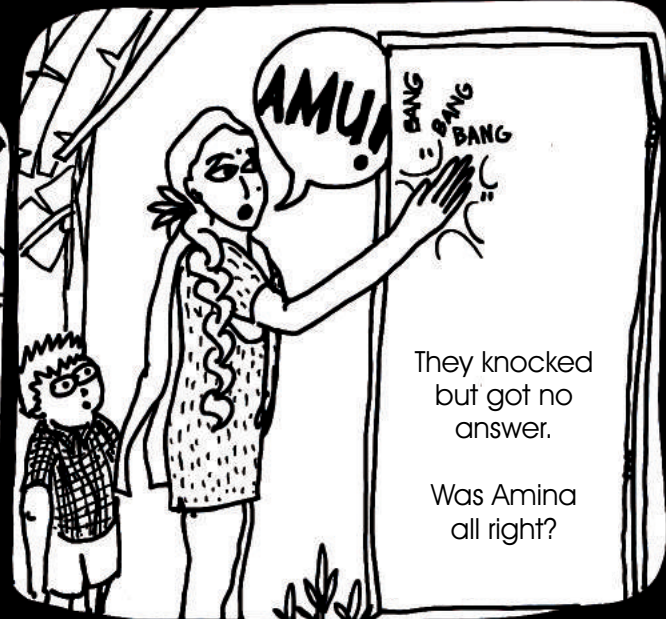


Amina was Vijaya's friend.





Vijaya and Ravi rushed towards  
Amina's house.



They knocked  
but got no  
answer.

Was Amina  
all right?



Sex determination tests  
to find the sex of an  
unborn baby were  
widely prevalent  
in their district.

It was common to  
abort baby girls  
in the womb.

Vijaya understood the reasons in a flash.  
Baby girls were unwanted!  
Better to abort them  
in the womb!



Vijaya cursed herself.  
Could she have stopped  
the murder and saved  
the baby girl?

Come Ravi,  
let's go home.  
We'll come later.

Hope Amina and  
the baby are fine?  
I pray for their safety  
and well-being.  
No one should  
undergo such horror!





As in most patriarchal societies, in Pudukkotti too, women's rights to equality, education and freedom were trampled on. Girl's education was low priority. Girls meant dowry and debt. Women earned less than men for the same work. They were the "unlucky" gender.

A girl's destiny was decided by men - father, brothers, and husband. From birth to death women lived a life of fear, and exploitation.





Vijaya pondered over these issues.  
She dreamt of a just world which would  
accord women their rightful place.  
But not all was amiss.



A dynamic, lady officer Ms. Sheela Rani Chunkath had recently been appointed  
as the District Collector of Pudukkottai. As Chairperson of the District Literacy  
Society and in-charge of the National Literacy Mission (NLM) she had a tough  
task at hand. She had to make the literacy programme a success.

Good  
morning,  
everyone!



Good  
morning,  
Madam!



Even after many years of Independence India's literacy record remained dismal. It had the largest unschooled population in the world. Top down Government Adult Education classes ran largely on paper.

In the 1980's the Government involved Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) and People's Science Movements (PSM's) to imbue life in the literacy campaign.

The motivated cadres of the PSM's were able to mobilize people in large numbers.

In 1989, with the help of the Kerala Sashtira Sahitya Parishat, Ernakulum District in Kerala became the first Totally Literate District in India.

Inspired by this the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) replicated the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) in Pudukkottai.

Eminent educationist Dr. V. B. Athreya was the State coordinator of the BGVS.

They mobilized volunteers, teachers and principals, Rotary, Lion's Club, Religious Groups and Bank Officers etc in this mission.

**AKSHARA KERALAM** made Kerala the first fully literate state in 1991.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who taught landless peasants and farm workers to read and write in just 30 days! The new primers were modelled on Freire's revolutionary pedagogy.

"B" was not for "Ball" but "Bonded Labour"  
"M" was not for "Monkey" but "Moneylender"

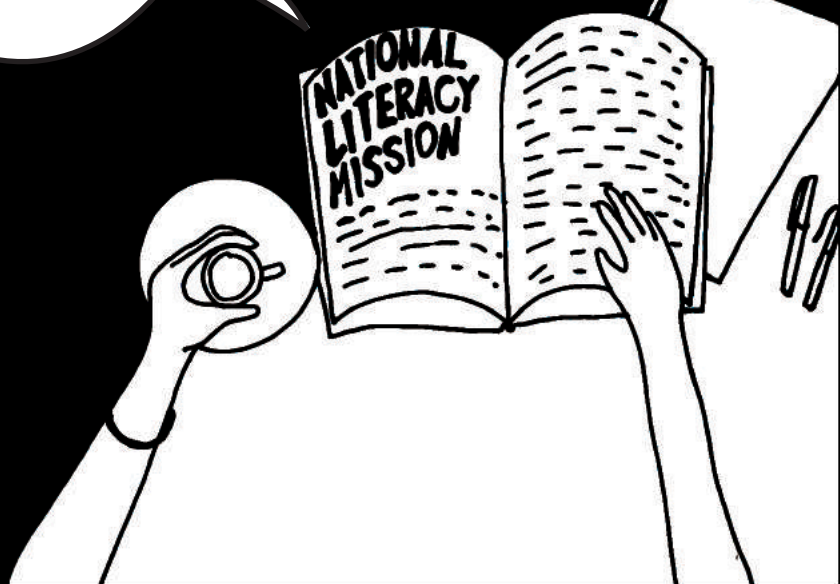
As the new primers reflected the lives and struggles of the poor they became an instant hit and captured the imagination of the learners.

Sheela Rani added **CYCLING** to the 3Rs.

The BGVS found an able ally in Collector Sheela Rani. As a sensitive officer she cranked the government machinery to respond to the challenge.

Her slogan was:

Teach a boy and you make a man;  
Teach a girl and you teach a generation





The District literacy survey results were shocking...



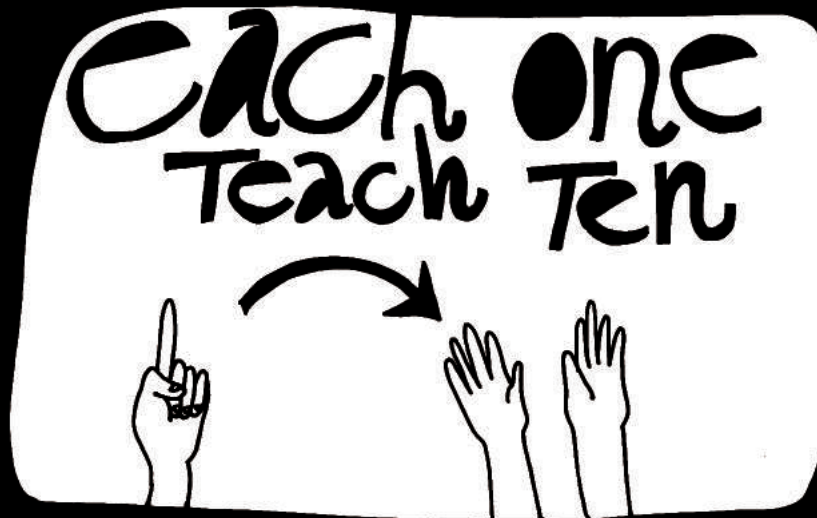
The BGVS showed that even in a non-revolutionary social milieu it was possible to carry out a mass literacy campaign. The innate goodness and volunteer spirit of people could be harnessed for a good cause.

Thus started - the **Light of Knowledge Movement** (ARIVOLI IYAKKAM) which cut across linguistic, caste, religious and other sectarian barriers.

Entire villages came out to support ARIVOLI activities. Songs, poems and impromptu speeches bubbled up from unschooled people.

Once the classes started in earnest the movement gained credibility. Word spread and more volunteers pitched in.

Their simple slogan was :  
**EACH ONE TEACH TEN**



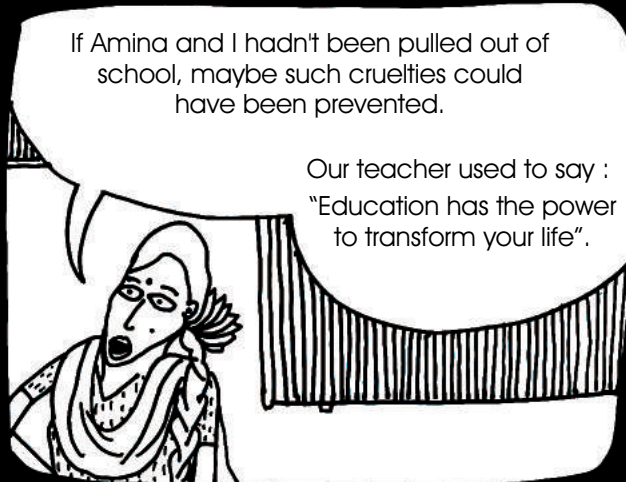
That evening as Vijaya and Ravi sat down to eat there was discomfort in the air.



Any news Vijaya?

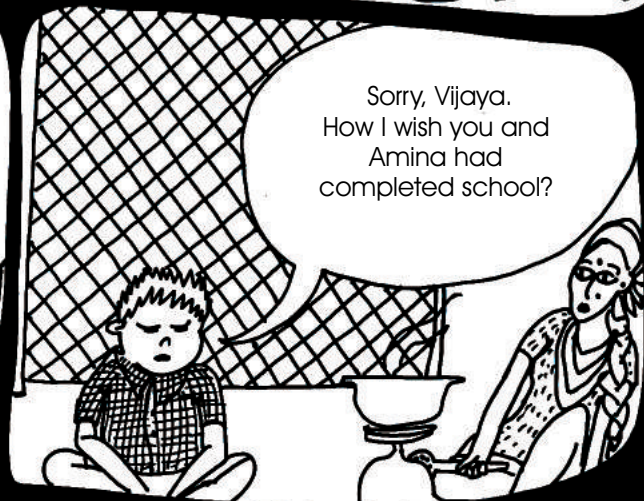
None.  
Could women in some way help in preventing such crimes?

If Amina and I hadn't been pulled out of school, maybe such cruelties could have been prevented.



Our teacher used to say :  
"Education has the power  
to transform your life".

Sorry, Vijaya.  
How I wish you and  
Amina had  
completed school?



Amma-Appa did what  
they felt was right.



As women, we  
must accept our  
fate. It isn't an  
individual's fault.

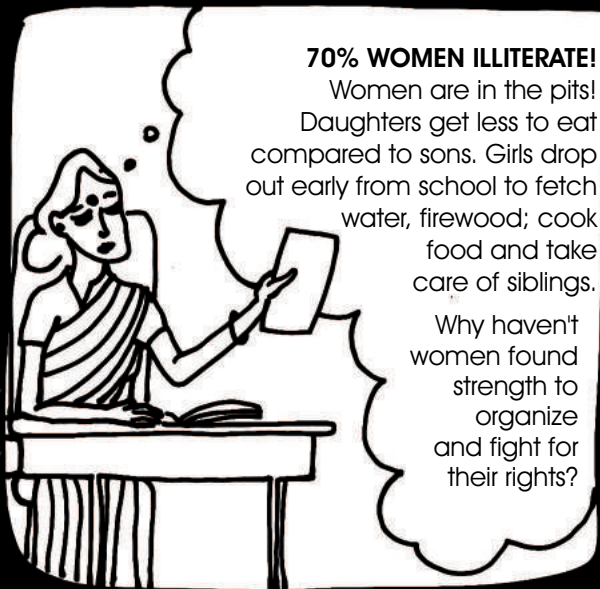
But we must  
continue our  
struggles.

I'm glad  
you aren't  
sad  
Vijaya!





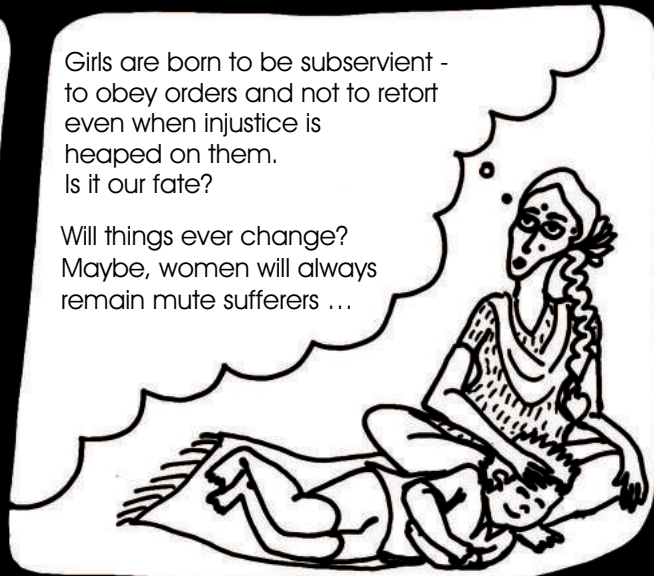
That night, two women thought hard over the sad state of women.  
But could they change the situation?



**70% WOMEN ILLITERATE!**

Women are in the pits!  
Daughters get less to eat  
compared to sons. Girls drop  
out early from school to fetch  
water, firewood; cook  
food and take  
care of siblings.

Why haven't  
women found  
strength to  
organize  
and fight for  
their rights?



Girls are born to be subservient -  
to obey orders and not to retort  
even when injustice is  
heaped on them.  
Is it our fate?

Will things ever change?  
Maybe, women will always  
remain mute sufferers ...

....Our scriptures exalt  
Durga and Kali. But  
reality is very different.  
In the real world,  
women don't have  
much say.  
Men decide;  
women meekly follow.  
Women's  
oppression will  
remain the same.



Women of Pudukkottai  
will benefit the most by  
learning to read and write!  
Education will open their  
minds and give flight  
to their imagination.  
With education,  
women will be  
able to transform  
their lives for  
the better.



We will never  
be  
**STRONG  
ENOUGH!**



We need to  
make our  
women  
**STRONG!**



Next day, Sheela Rani called a meeting to discuss the finer nitty-gritties of the Literacy Campaign.



Madam, the programme holds good promise.

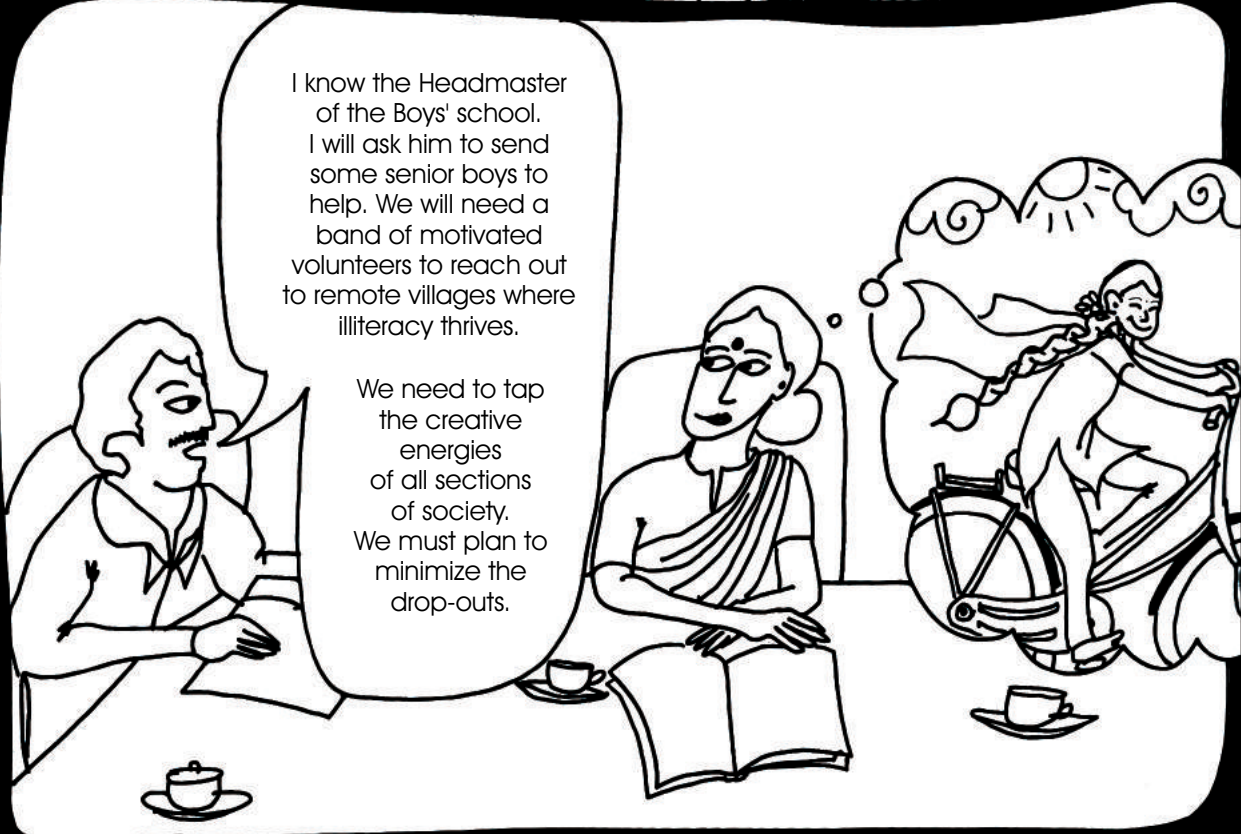
The BGVS has already laid the warp and weft - the basic foundation for the campaign.

But right now we need an army of motivated men and boys to kick-start the campaign.

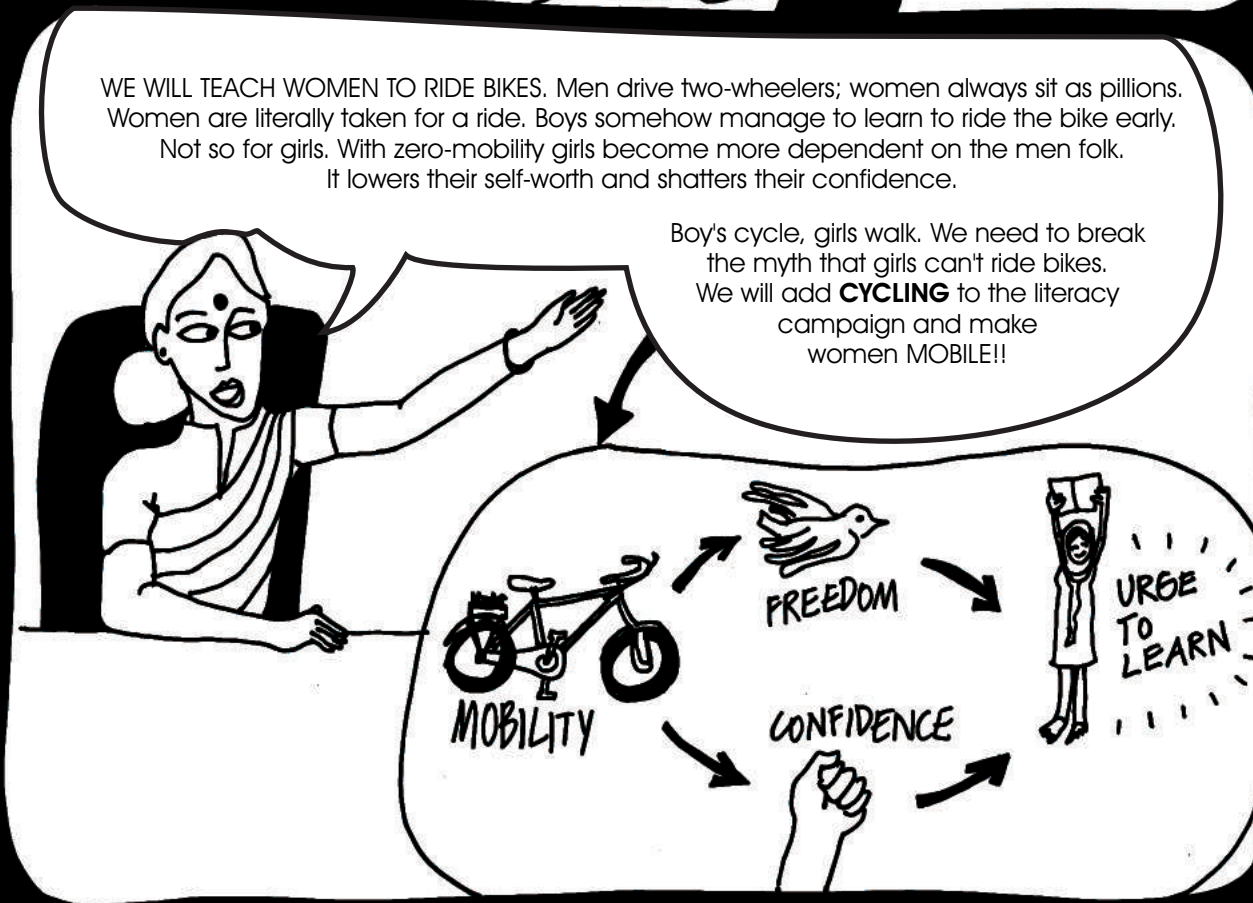
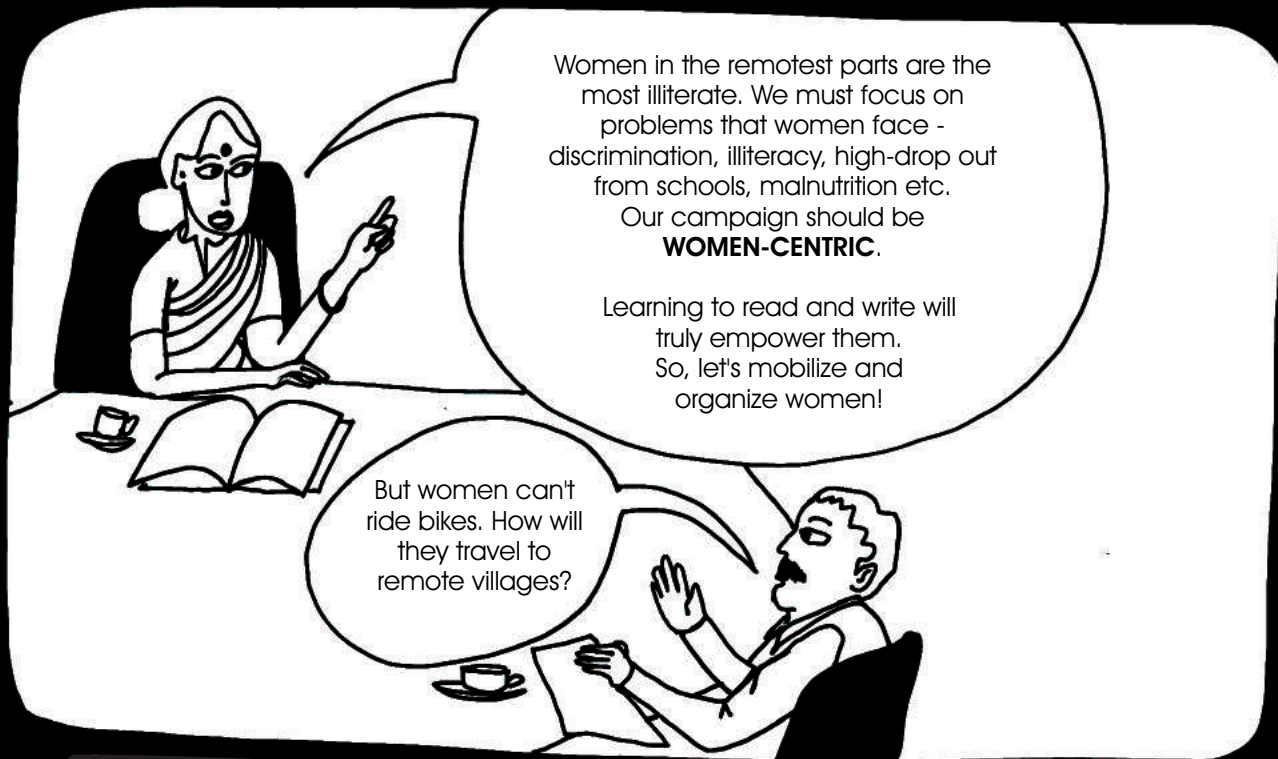
We need to act fast!

I know the Headmaster of the Boys' school. I will ask him to send some senior boys to help. We will need a band of motivated volunteers to reach out to remote villages where illiteracy thrives.

We need to tap the creative energies of all sections of society. We must plan to minimize the drop-outs.









We will add **CYCLING** to the literacy campaign. Then women can fetch firewood and water on the carrier; and sell vegetables to get the best price. This will make them self-reliant.

It will take time and a lot of struggle. But it is certainly worth trying.



Women of Pudukkottai will love to learn cycling. It will liberate them from the bondage of caste and class. The bicycles will add great fun to the literacy campaign.

Er.... well....  
We'll see.

The bicycle revolution took off with a **BANG!** Soon small girls, farm labourers, hardworking quarry women started cycling. They were not just steering bikes - but their own destinies.





FROM  
DARKNESS  
TO LIGHT



A popular slogan during the campaign:

TODAY ON THE MOON  
THERE IS A HUMAN FOOTPRINT,  
SHAME ON YOU  
FOR USING YOUR THUMBPRINT!

# 1. LITERACY

# 2. NUMERACY

# 5. MOBILITY



One woman quarry worker said:

"By learning to cycle, I have broken many barriers - gender, age, caste and class. It was unheard of for a woman from a poor *dalit* family like mine to even touch the cycle, let alone ride it through the streets. Now I can talk on equal terms with the contractors and even ride past them!"

# 3. FUNCTIONALITY

# 4. AWARENESS

The success of the Total Literacy Programme (TLC) was based on:

1. Political commitment of policy makers.
2. Involvement of learners and community at large.
3. Spirit of volunteerism.
4. Suitable state infra-structure.
5. Flexibility in decision making.
6. A tight calendar.







In India,  
the bicycle  
has been the  
**VEHICLE OF THE MASSES.**

People use the bike to  
carry sacks of grain,  
heaps of firewood,  
pots of water and barrels  
of milk. Often the entire  
family travels on  
the bike.

During the American Women's Liberation  
Movement the bicycle symbolized  
**INDEPENDENCE** and **FREEDOM.**

Bicycle is the most energy efficient form  
of transportation ever invented. It uses no  
fossil fuels, emits no noxious gases and  
leaves behind **NO CARBON FOOTPRINT.**

There is a car  
conspiracy. People are  
paid fat cheques to eat  
junk food in expensive  
joints to become obese.  
And then they fritter this  
money on gyms and  
health spas. So what  
they earn is soon  
snatched away.

For short  
distance travel  
there is  
nothing to  
beat the bike.  
No more  
waiting for  
crowded  
buses!

The bicycle is a multi-terrain vehicle. It can go  
through fields, dirt tracks and streams.

The bike is your personal gym with  
**MINIMUM MAINTENANCE, MAXIMUM BENEFITS.**

With very few moving parts it is easy to fix.  
The bike is light enough to be lifted and carried on  
the shoulder in case of an emergency.



Soon literacy classes were held within 200-meters from a learner's house. Volunteers taught 10-15 learner's for 90-minutes at night, five-six times a week. The classes were held in homes, temple courtyards, mosques, cow sheds, under street lamps often huddling around kerosene wick bottles.

**EACH ONE  
TEACH TEN +**

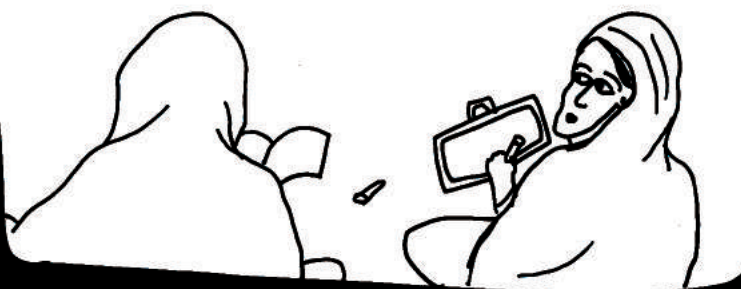


**ARIVOLI  
IYAKKAM:**



Vasantha - a neo-literate had this comment:

**"I have become a compulsive reader. I read everything which comes my way - billboards and signs. I even read the newspaper in which my provisions are packed."**





One morning, the literacy camp had a secret visitor. Ravi was peeping over the wall. He was thrilled to see so many women learning to read and write.



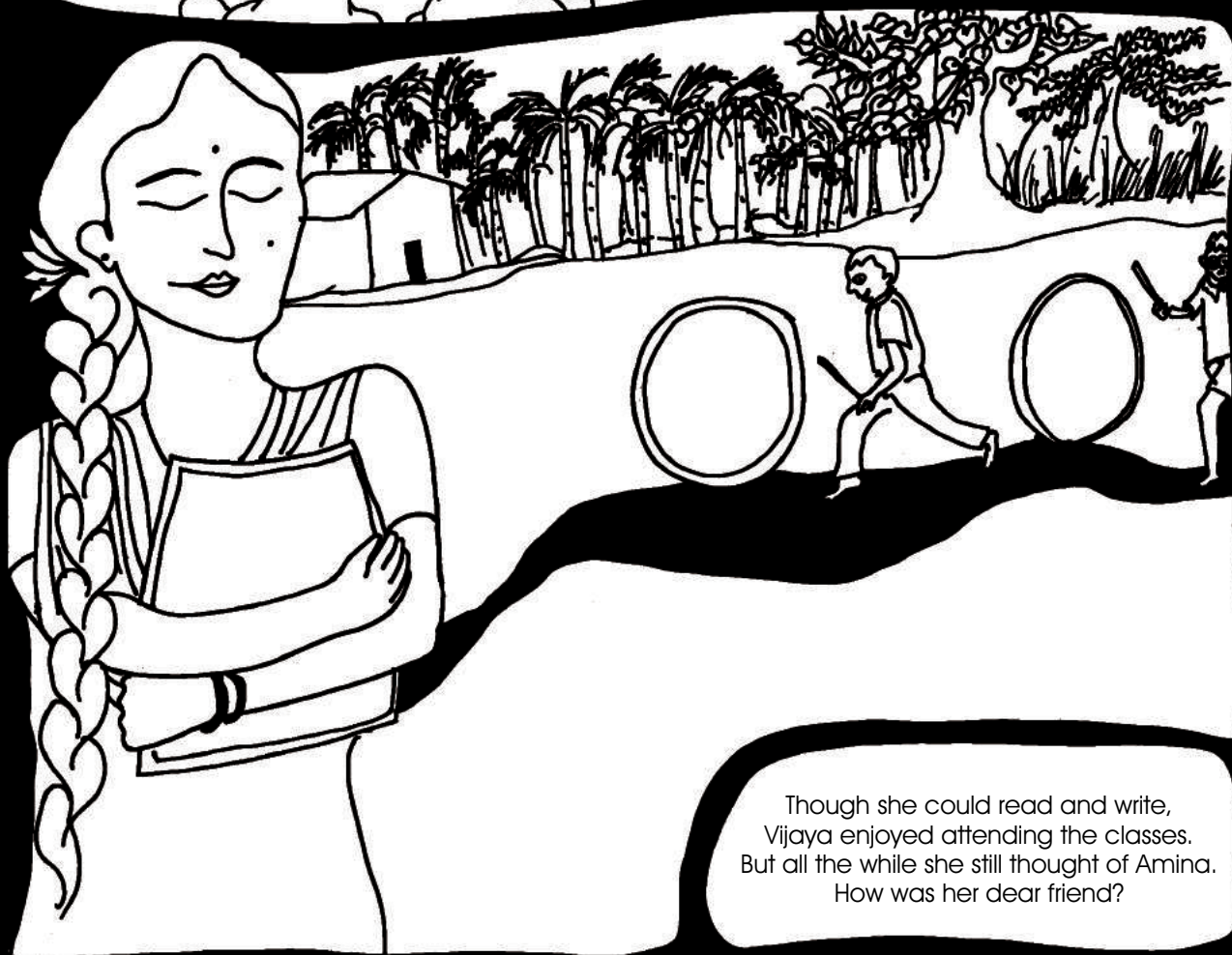
How nice!  
Finally, there were classes for women!  
Ravi had a twinkle in his eyes.  
He would bring Vijaya here.  
She'd be thrilled!







That very day, Vijaya joined the literacy class.



Though she could read and write, Vijaya enjoyed attending the classes. But all the while she still thought of Amina. How was her dear friend?

Soon many songs were composed in praise of cycling.

"Learn to ride the cycle sister,  
Set in motion the wheel of life, sister.  
Times have changed,  
Now women drive, men sit on the carrier!"

Women were happy but not the men.  
Women cyclists evoked many abusive  
responses from men.

I was  
scared but  
it was such  
amazing  
fun!



**HOW DARE  
THEY?**



Men felt their power  
slipping and  
got furious.  
Why were women  
attempting such  
ridiculous things?

What hurt them  
most was that  
women were  
learning cycling  
without the  
men's help.

If they come  
cycling,  
I will  
throw  
mud at  
them!



Men ridiculed women.  
They jeered and  
poked fun at them.

But unmindful of these  
threats the women  
kept pedalling,  
spreading the  
message of mobility,  
empowerment  
and self-reliance.





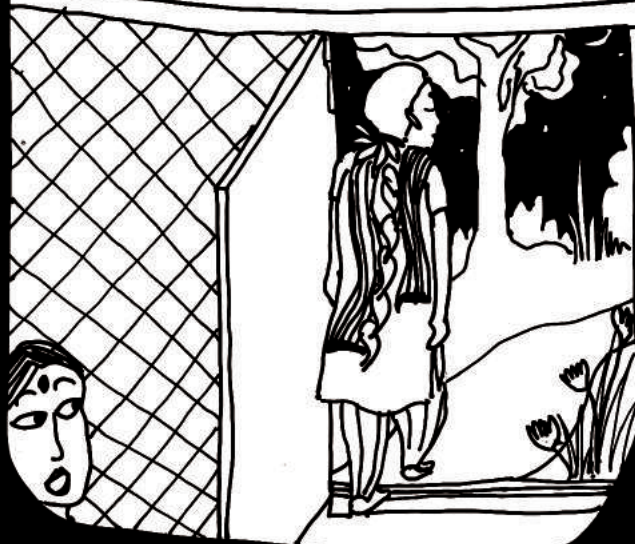


With so much animosity from men the volunteers decided to hold cycling classes at night. With fewer men jeering at night, cycling was more peaceful.



The women eagerly awaited the night lessons - without the men's barbs.

Vijaya, too, enrolled herself in a cycling camp. She did this secretly. However, one night, her mother spotted her slowly tiptoeing out of the house...



Vijaya's mother was horrified. All kinds of dreadful thoughts filled her mind. To ensure Vijaya's safety, she quietly followed her one night...



...and couldn't believe her eyes. Her shy daughter, Vijaya, was zipping around, on a **BICYCLE!** Her heart glowed as she walked back home.



Next morning,  
at Vijaya's house -

Vijaya, there is something  
I have been wanting  
to talk to you.  
You probably can help us.  
I work in the stone quarry near  
the lake. The contractor is  
very exploitative.

He does not  
even pay us  
minimum  
wages.

Of course,  
I'll do my  
best!

What's it,  
Amma?

Last week the contractor, called our  
friend Senthil and forced him to put his  
thumbprint on some paper. Senthil being  
illiterate couldn't read the document.

Now, that paper  
makes Senthil  
a bonded  
labourer to  
the contractor!

The contractor  
treats him and  
others like his  
slaves!

Amma, you need to learn to  
read and write to help them!

Yes, and  
cycling too?  
I know!

**HOW?**

I followed  
you last night.  
I was really  
impressed.

You are  
educated,  
enlightened!

Thanks so much Amma! I thought you  
will be upset. To be able to read  
and write is almost magical!  
I will take you there tomorrow.

And so, Vijaya's mother, too,  
joined the brigade of new learners.



Collector Sheela Rani had heard horrid stories of the quarry contractor. She planned a scheme where a group of women could lease a piece of land and quarry it cooperatively and say **HELL** to the contractor.

The women need help.



The quarry workers worked in primitive conditions. Their wages were delayed. The women were paid less than the men for the same amount of work.



The contractor was politically connected. No one could dare raise her voice ...



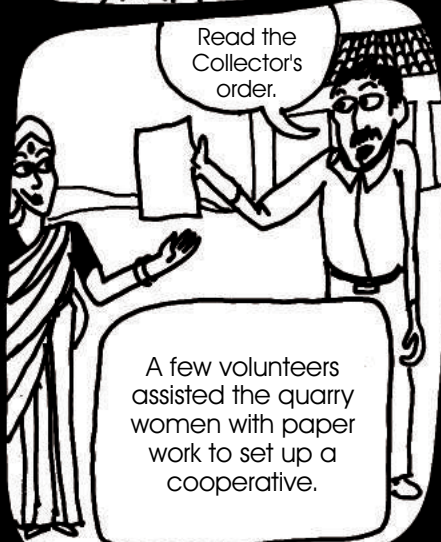
But after the Collector's order, the women rejoiced.



We need to learn to read and write!

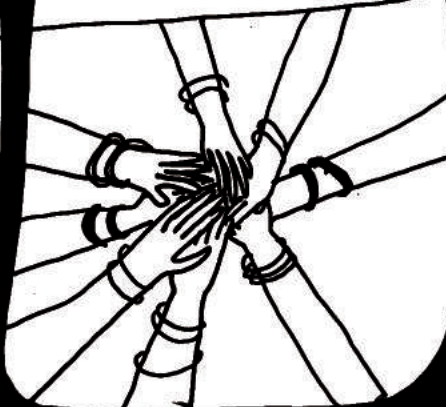


Read the Collector's order.



A few volunteers assisted the quarry women with paper work to set up a cooperative.

Vijaya's mother led the first group and leased a piece of land in Pudukkottai for quarrying...



...and they did famously. In the literacy classes they learnt of their rights.

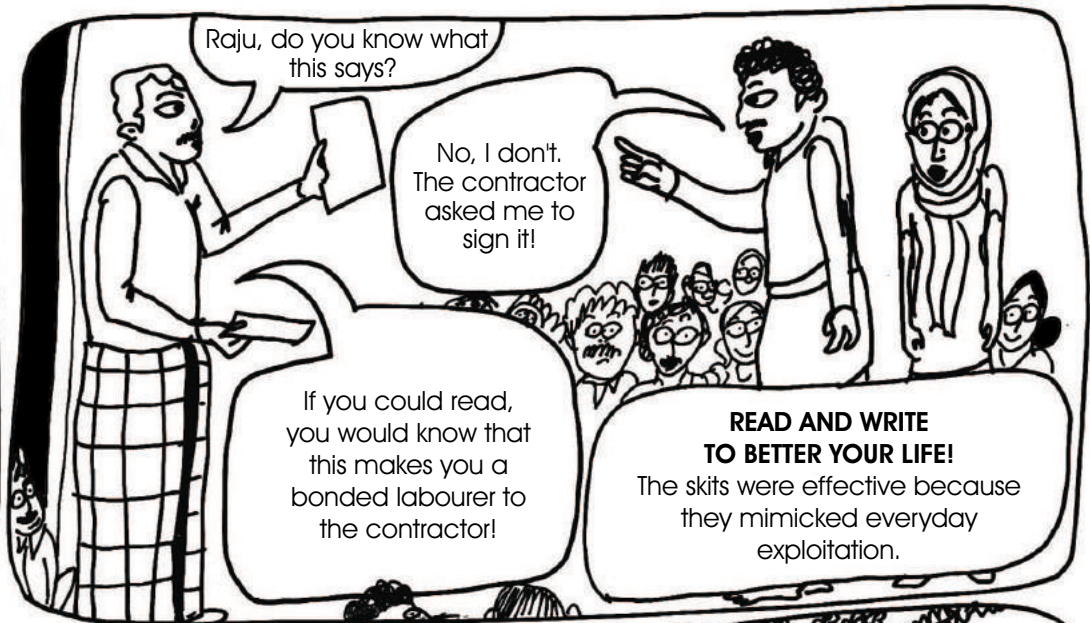
The quarry workers had freed themselves from the yoke of the contractor.

Instead of seeking work, they were now creating jobs for others. Learning to read was still difficult, but riding a bike was sheer fun!



Many Muslim women were unable to read the letters their husbands sent from the Gulf. Under the plea of making them read the *Koran*, the women were sent to the literacy classes.

Street theatre was very effective in bringing the message of literacy. Skits, dramas were regularly performed to increase awareness.



Street theater was a good way to make the people speak.

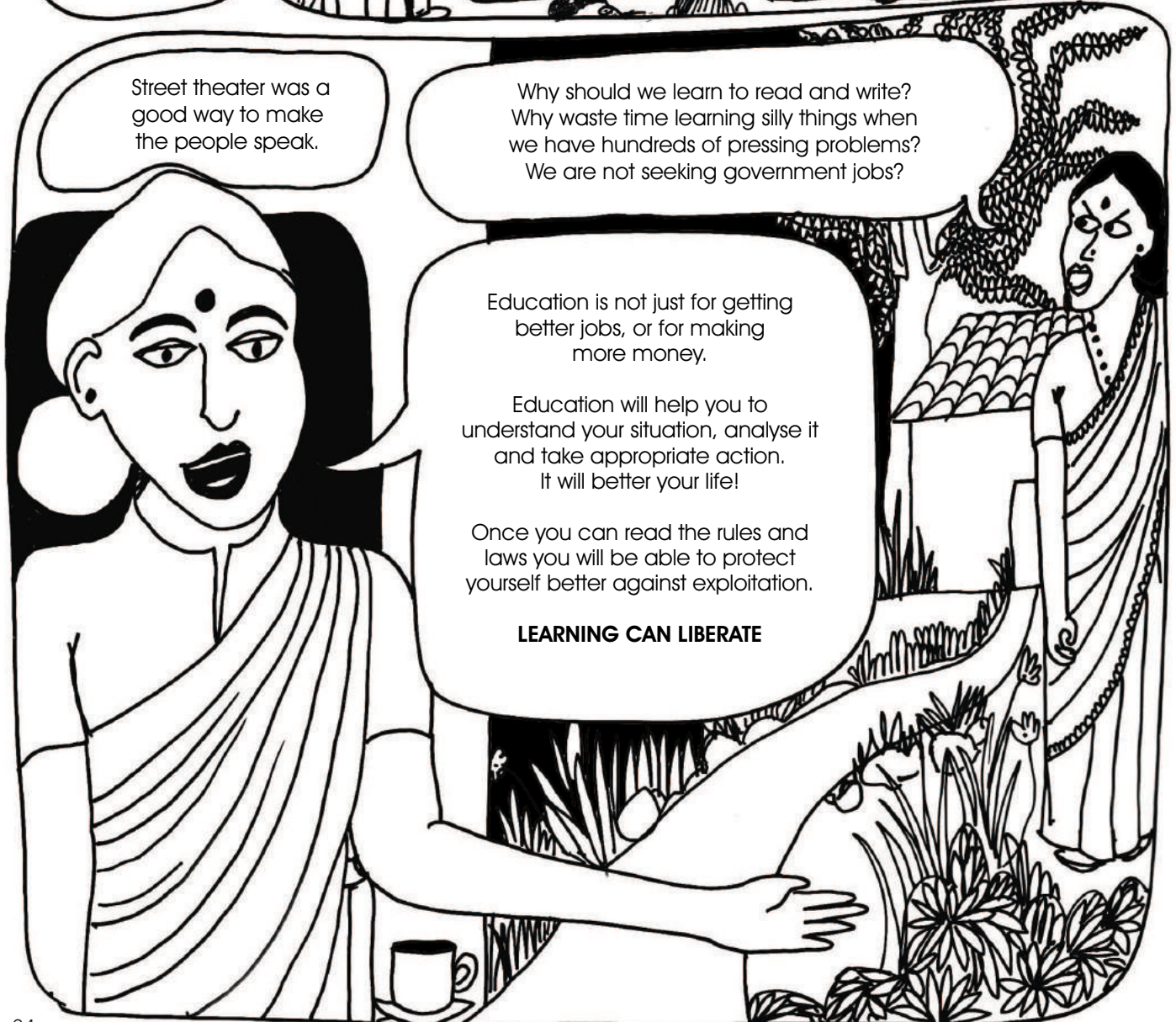
Why should we learn to read and write?  
Why waste time learning silly things when we have hundreds of pressing problems?  
We are not seeking government jobs?

Education is not just for getting better jobs, or for making more money.

Education will help you to understand your situation, analyse it and take appropriate action.  
It will better your life!

Once you can read the rules and laws you will be able to protect yourself better against exploitation.

**LEARNING CAN LIBERATE**





Men simply couldn't stand the sight of women riding bikes. Soon the atmosphere became dangerous. Men disapproved of this freedom. The women were challenging their age old authority. How could they?

How dare she disobey me?  
Who does she think she is?  
She just can't zoom around on a bike like a hooligan!



It is time I give her a piece of my mind! What will the elders of the community say? A woman riding a bike all alone at night is awful. These shameful acts must stop!

What does she mean by "independence"? In fact, I myself drop her to the temple every day!

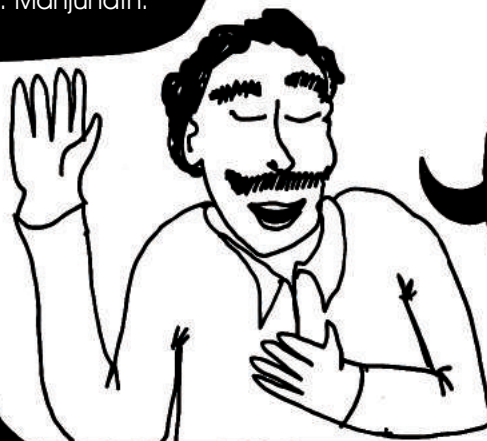


Why do women need to read and write? Don't their husbands work hard and bring home money?

There was only one person who was delighted with the new cyclists. He was the lone bicycle seller in Pudukkottai Mr. R. Manjunath.



Women must be independent! They must be able to move around on their own! It's the only way society will progress!



A slow transformation took place in Vijaya's home. Having tasted freedom Vijaya's mother was dying to try out new things.





Despite continuous taunting  
and jeering the women  
kept pedalling.

Over **ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND**  
women learnt to cycle in Pudukkottai.

UNICEF was impressed by this feat  
and gifted 50 mopeds to village  
women health workers.

Finally, the wheel had started  
rolling for women!



N. Kannamal - Central  
Coordinator of the Total Literacy  
Campaign, in an emotional  
moment, said that being on the  
bike made her feel like  
**A PILOT IN FLIGHT!**

She composed a song:

#### BIKE I LIKE

I steer with the handle  
And pedal with my feet  
I can go long distance  
Even in the heat.

Riding on the cycle  
Is freedom, full of bliss  
While dropping them to school  
The children get a kiss!

Many women  
preferred the men's  
bike with the  
handlebar in the  
front where they  
could seat a child.

Slowly, the  
movement gained  
not only  
momentum,  
but also credibility.

# DISCOVERING JOY

Now I carry my children on the bike and show them the whole town!  
I can do more work in a shorter span of time!



I can sell vegetables far away and get a better price!



Since I started cycling, my husband has started treating me with respect and as an equal.



I need to finish my riding lessons fast, as my literacy class starts within an hour!



Will you take me there?  
I'd love to join too.

Soon, the literacy classes became synonymous with cycling. Some women came to the literacy classes straight from the cycling lessons...

Tell me more about the cycle lessons?  
Can anyone enrol?  
What is the fee?  
In childhood, my brothers would drive my father's cycle. I grew up thinking I couldn't learn cycling. But I have always been curious to learn.



CYCLING added a new dimension to literacy. And once the women's appetite was whetted they wanted more! Over a quarter of all rural women learnt cycling in a year!



# WE CAN'T AFFORD IT, BUT-



Many women couldn't afford to buy bikes. So, Manjunath's Bicycle Shop started renting bikes on an hourly basis. In the absence of women's bike they learnt cycling on men's bike. Women somehow managed the bike rent. They shared bikes and split rents.



Sheela Rani got many social organizations - Rotarians, Lions, Religious Groups and Trusts to donate bikes. She ordered banks to give loans for bikes. She asked manufactures to rush more cycles to Pudukkottai.





Amidst all this joy, there was one person who was left behind. One afternoon, Vijaya spotted her old friend Amina in the market. She couldn't believe her eyes.



I am thrilled to see you.  
Come, let's first go home,  
and have some good food!  
God, we've been terribly worried  
about you!



Just then at Manjunath's Cycle Shop, Ravi spotted his father, deep in conversation with the shop owner.





After a while they all reached home together...



Did you like it?  
Is this the model  
of the cycle you  
wanted?

I love it!  
But how did you  
arrange the  
money?

Manjunath  
is my old friend!  
We can pay him  
in instalments!

I am at a loss  
for words!  
Thanks so much!

While Vijaya's mother admired the new cycle, Amina and Vijaya sat chatting.

Vijaya, it was horrible, staying with him. My husband desperately wanted a son. The day we got the ultrasound test report, he just dragged me to the hospital for the abortion.

OH GOD.



God, Vijaya, I feel awful for what happened! That poor baby girl was killed for no fault of hers! I have been walking around the village like a zombie. I felt numb till I saw you, and then it all came rushing back. What do I do now, Vijaya?



Shhh, quiet. Don't worry. You're safe with us. I won't let anything happen to you.

I'll take you somewhere tonight, which will lift your spirits.

WOW.

WELL DONE, SAKINA!

TRINGA



Before being pulled out of school Amina had always been an ace student. Once again Amina felt a deep desire to learn.

Amina, the National Literacy Mission is conducting both literacy classes and well as cycling lessons for all women in our District.

They call it the Total Literacy Campaign. I have joined these classes, and it's been a wonderful experience! It felt as if I was back in school, learning new things!



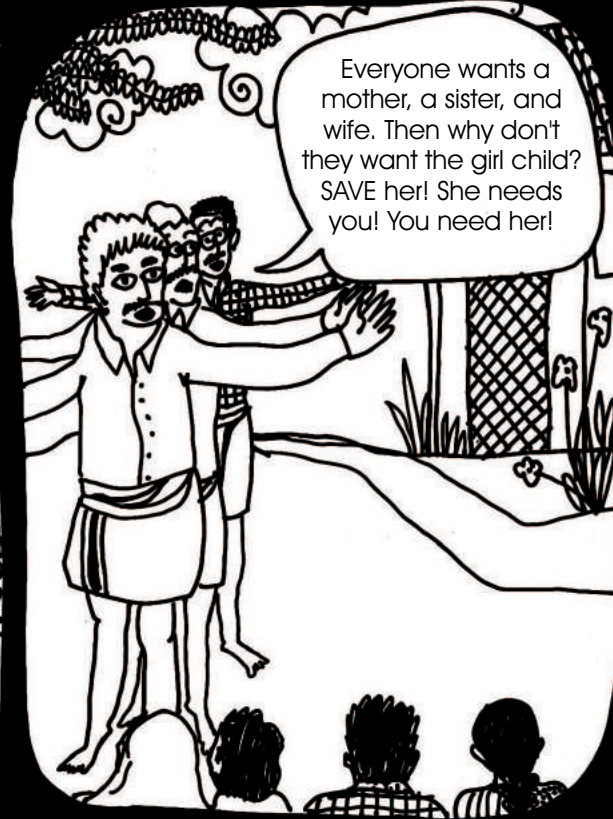
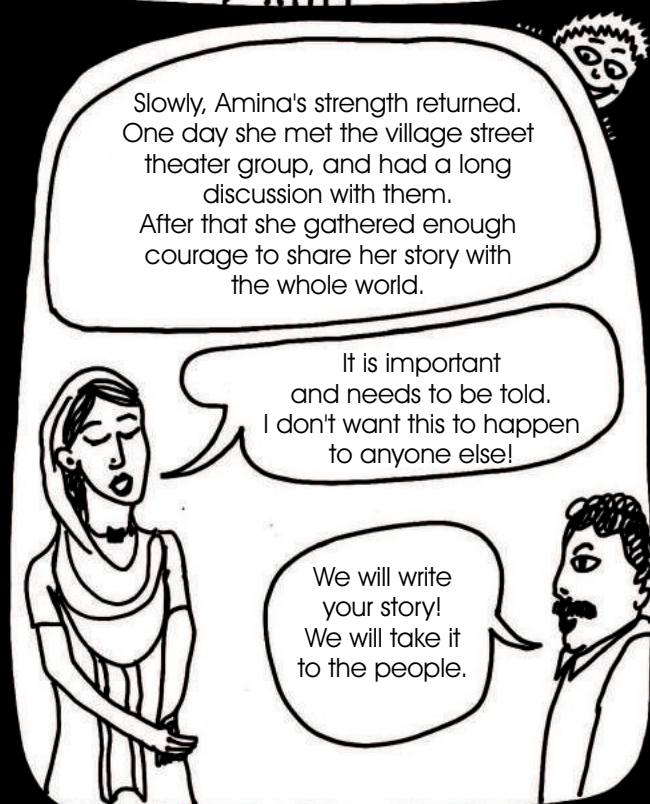
Such a thing has never happened before in our little town!

I would love to see these literacy classes. As I already know how to read and write, I would like to help out too!





That very week, Amina joined the classes.  
She was both learning and teaching.  
Soon, all her fatigue vanished.





The mass struggle of women gave Amina the courage to speak against women's oppression. She became a full time social activist.

# AMINA



Sheela Rani epitomized an ideal pro-poor, pro-women government officer. In 2008, she won the Prime Minister's Award for the Best Administrator in India.

# SHEELA RANI



Many cycle races were organised in which thousands of women participated.





**THE BIKE BRIGADE**  
**100,000**  
**WOMEN ON WHEELS!**

The women of Pudukkottai taught the world a lesson. Even in the most hopeless situation they found ways of hitting at their backwardness - of expressing defiance, and hammered at the fetters of bondage.

In 1991 an extraordinary and unprecedented experiment took place in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu, India. As part of the National Literacy Mission more than ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND unlettered village women learnt not only to read and write but also to ride BICYCLES. Freedom and mobility for women on this scale was unheard of anywhere in the world. For the first time this inspiring story is being told in a captivating graphic novel.

**Arvind Gupta** is a science populariser and toymaker. He did a BTech from IIT Kanpur in 1975. He has received several honours, including the inaugural *National Award for Science Popularization amongst Children (1988)*, *Distinguished Alumnus Award of IIT, Kanpur (2000)*, *Indira Gandhi Award for Science Popularization (2008)* and the *Third World Academy of Science Award (2010)* for making science interesting for children. He shares his passion for books and toys through his popular website <http://arvindguptatoys.com>

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